

**Pre-K Decision-Making  
In New Orleans Public Schools:  
Incentives and Disincentives to Offering Pre-K  
In a Decentralized Environment**

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## Introduction

In recent decades, several new governance approaches to public education have arisen that challenge the long-standing ideas of a traditional district model (NEPC, 2016). One such approach is the portfolio model, a model being applied increasingly in urban school districts around the country, though nowhere quite so comprehensively as in the city of New Orleans. However, one concern of a highly decentralized model like the one in New Orleans is that it may produce a deficit in the coordination of non-mandatory services.

Public pre-kindergarten (pre-k) programming is an example of a highly effective, but non-mandatory service. The benefits of pre-k range from increased kindergarten readiness and continued educational attainment to decreased rates of delinquency and higher earnings later in life (Currie, 2001 & Yoshikawa, 1995). While early learning has proven to be highly beneficial, especially for low-income students, it is also very costly (Magnuson, 2010). In the 2013-14 school year, it was estimated that the per-child funding gap to offer a pre-k program in Louisiana was over \$3,600 (Weixler et al., 2017). Given these positive impacts on society, and for the participants themselves, more and more districts are investing in and expanding upon their pre-k offerings. As an optional service, however, the financial burden of running pre-k programs might make schools in a highly decentralized environment less inclined to offer pre-k programs.

Recent research on New Orleans in the ten years since Hurricane Katrina finds that the availability of school-based pre-k seats has dropped, even as kindergarten seats have continued to rise relative to the rest of Louisiana (Weixler

et al., 2017). This drop in school-based New Orleans pre-k seats is inconsistent with trends throughout the rest of the state, as well as nationwide, where public pre-k seats are remaining constant, or increasing (NIEER, 2015). Given the positive effects of pre-k and the issues involved in providing this service in a portfolio district, it is critically important to understand *who* chooses to offer these pre-k programs, and *why*, as well as *what* mechanisms may be dis-incentivizing others from offering these same services, and *how* policymakers may go about making public pre-k an increasingly attractive option for the city's schools.

## Portfolio Models

The idea behind the portfolio model in education is largely credited to the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE), and defined as “a problem-solving framework through which education and civic leaders develop a citywide system of high-quality, diverse, autonomous public schools” (CRPE, 2017). CRPE outlines several components on which a successful portfolio district must be built, including expansion of school choice, school-level decentralization of management, and performance based accountability (CRPE, 2017). Portfolio districts require a strong central management system, though cities currently employing the strategy have varying degrees of centralization. Currently, 35 cities nationwide, serving a total of over 4 million students, have adopted this strategy for their city's schools (CRPE, 2017).

The operational theory underlying the educational portfolio model draws from stock market best practices. It relies on a diverse array of educational options

being managed by a central office or a portfolio manager, and giving parents choices of high quality schooling options, with lower performing or less desirable options generally ending in closure or turnaround (NEPC, 2016). However, the concept of education as a business, and the free market as a mechanism for improving educational outcomes has been widely challenged. Those who question the integrity of the portfolio model argue that the free market approach to education fails to “guarantee an efficient allocation of resources and deliver quality education through competition” (Chattopadhyay, 2012).

Because an efficient allocation of resources in a highly decentralized context requires “the central office [to] play an active management role... highly deregulated districts like New Orleans are problematic implementations” (NEPC, 2016). Therefore, New Orleans presents a strategic case to examine the question of how to more effectively offer these important early learning services.

## **Background on the Case of New Orleans**

Over the past decade, large-scale reforms have changed the education landscape significantly (Babineau, 2017). In New Orleans, Louisiana, the transition to a nearly all charter district, or portfolio district, resulted in high levels of autonomy in exchange for increased accountability for public schools. In the years since the introduction of the education reforms in New Orleans, policymakers have taken steps to mitigate some of the inefficiencies that come with this highly decentralized public school system. However, the city still struggles with how to

effectively provide citywide coordinated services that are more readily available in a traditional district school setting.

Prior to 2005 and the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, schools in New Orleans were some of the worst performing schools at both the state and national level. In addition to their academic failures, the city's schools were under so many investigations of theft, fraud, and corruption that in 2004, several FBI members were placed in an office within the school district itself (Greenblatt, 2014). As a result, oversight of a handful of the lowest performing schools in New Orleans was transitioned to the Louisiana Recovery School District (RSD), which was created by the state in 2003 with the intention of transferring oversight of chronically failing schools throughout Louisiana over to the state.

Post-Katrina New Orleans, though, saw even more radical reforms in its K-12 public education system. Rather than rebuilding the corrupt and academically failing school system that existed pre-Katrina, reform advocates pushed to create a new system of education in New Orleans – a charter school system. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the Louisiana Legislature, with the support of Governor Kathleen Blanco, voted to transition control of a majority of public schools in New Orleans from the local Orleans Parish School Board to the state-run Recovery School District. Schools in the city are currently overseen by one of three oversight bodies: the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB), the Recovery School District (RSD), or the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE). In conjunction with the transition of school oversight away from the OPSB, many traditional district schools

were replaced with charter schools. As of the 2016-17 school year, 93% of all public school students in New Orleans attend charter schools (SPENO, 2017).

As is usual for charter schools, greater autonomy allowed them more freedom to make decisions about their day-to-day operations. With this autonomy, however, came a system of strict accountability (Finnigan, 2007). In addition to holding schools accountable to performance standards, the new open enrollment policy allows for parents and students to vote with their feet. If a school is not meeting the needs of a student, families can easily enroll their child in a different school for the next year. As a result, underperforming schools now have the additional threat of being closed down due to poor academic performance and under-enrollment. In the 5 years from 2010 through 2014, over one-third of the city's underperforming schools have been closed or have undergone a state-mandated turnaround (Recovery School District, 2014).

In addition to increasing autonomy and accountability, the introduction of charter schools and the Recovery School District caused a major shift in the governance structure of the city's public schools (Appendix A). The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Recovery School District and the Orleans Parish School Board act as the three oversight bodies, but schools have the autonomy to make the decisions they feel are best for their school and their students. Within these broader governing bodies, schools in New Orleans fall into two categories: networked and non-networked. Networked schools operate under Charter Management Organizations (CMOs), a central administrative office that oversees several schools within their 'network'. Non-network schools operate as

stand-alone schools, with no centralized administrative office outside of their school. As a result of this new and highly decentralized governance structure, New Orleans schools are less able to take advantage of economies of scale and have more limited financial flexibility than a traditional district school, which may in turn change the ways in which school leaders make decisions about their schools.

At the highest level, charter schools in New Orleans' portfolio district are overseen by authorizing bodies at either the local parish level or the state level. In addition, charter schools or networks must be governed by a non-profit board, which enters into a charter contract with the authorizing body, and is then responsible for ensuring quality outcomes on academic, financial, and organizational measures of the schools they oversee. These boards are ultimately responsible for approving a charter school's grade expansion to provide pre-k.

Funding for public pre-k programs in New Orleans is limited and highly competitive. Federal Head Start funds and state LA4 funds are the primary sources of funding in place to assist low-income families with the costs of pre-k. Head Start funds are federal dollars ear-marked for early learning programming for low-income children ages birth to five. Similarly, the Cecil J. Picard LA 4 Early Childhood Program provides LA4 funds, which are the primary funding source for all-day public pre-k programs serving economically disadvantaged 4-year-olds in the state of Louisiana (LA Department of Education, 2017). In the 2015-16 academic year, a federal Preschool Expansion Grant became available for high-need communities to both expand pre-k seats offered and improve upon currently operating pre-k programs. The majority of pre-k seats in Louisiana are funded through the LA4



early childhood program. This research will therefore focus on schools offering LA4 pre-k seats.

Research finds that in the ten years post-Katrina, availability of school-based pre-k seats dropped, even as kindergarten seats have continued to rise (Weixler et al., 2017). This drop in school-based New Orleans pre-k seats is inconsistent with trends throughout the rest of the state, as well as nationwide, where public pre-k seats are remaining constant, or increasing (NIEER, 2015). The benefits of early childhood programs have been well documented, as have the funding challenges that go along with them. However, less is known about how, if at all, the benefits and challenges of offering a pre-k program differ in a decentralized setting such as New Orleans. As charter schools become increasingly prevalent throughout the nation, it is important to understand how schools without a traditional district-level governance structure view pre-k, and what incentives exist to offset the potential barriers to offering pre-k in this context.

## **Literature Informing the Conceptual Framework**

Two literatures inform this inquiry: early childhood education and the decentralized charter school context. Together these literatures help to illuminate the importance of early childhood education as a component of the public education system, and the potential barriers posed to offering these services when services traditionally provided by a central office are decentralized. The literatures also informed the conceptual framework that was then used to guide the interview protocol design (Appendix C).

### Early childhood education

Research has shown that early childhood education has benefits ranging from increased kindergarten readiness and continued educational attainment to decreased rates of delinquency and higher earnings later in life (Currie, 2001 & Yoshikawa, 1995). In addition to the benefits to children and to society as a whole, several cost-benefit studies have demonstrated consistent returns on investment in early learning interventions. One study shows that, on average, the return is approximately \$6 per dollar invested (Reynolds, 2008). Similar findings have been reported in other cost-benefit evaluations (Federal Report, 2014). Additionally, research finds that low-income children are less likely than children from higher income families to enroll in early childhood programs (Child Trends, 2013). However, this same body of research also finds that public funding, and specifically pre-kindergarten subsidies for economically disadvantaged families, increases attendance rates in these early childhood programs for low-income children (Greenberg, 2010).

Due in large part to the vast amount of literature on the positive impacts of early learning programs, many states and cities are prioritizing pre-k programs. In the last decade, the percentage of three- to five-year-old children enrolled in some form of full day early learning program has increased by 5% (Child Trends, 2013). This growing interest is reflected in statewide initiatives such as Minnesota's Early Learning Scholarships and Chicago's Child Parent Center program, as well as at the federal level. Early learning initiatives were a key component of the Federal

Government's 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The Preschool Development Grants included within that legislation provide additional funds for states to build new preschool programming and expand upon existing high quality preschool programming. As such, in the context of New Orleans, the number of early childhood education options offered may be understood as contingent on the ability of schools to garner funding.

### **Decentralization and Charter Schools**

In addition to preparing students to enter kindergarten ready to learn, it is possible that a charter school, operating in a highly competitive environment, might use pre-k as a strategy for attracting and retaining students. Compared to traditional district schools, charter schools are granted increased autonomy and are held to higher levels of accountability. This tradeoff brings with it a unique set of challenges. Public funding streams to charter schools are consistently lower than those to traditional public schools, and threats of under-enrollment, high attrition, poor facilities, and closure create added pressure for charter schools to compete amongst one another for students (Frazier-Anderson, 2008; Hill, 2006; Izraeli & Murphy, 2008). For charter schools "a lot of things taken for granted in existing schools must be established from scratch, including basic arrangements for paying the bills, hiring people, and attracting customers" (Hill, 2006, p. 3).

While much research has been conducted on competition between charter schools and traditional district schools, less has been done on how charter schools compete with one another. It has, however, been well documented that in order to

attract and retain students, charters must market themselves in ways that set them apart from their competitors (Witty & Power, 2000). In increasingly 'marketized' environments, schools are seeking to provide the best products and services for parents and students to choose from (Lubienski, 2007). In one study of school leaders' responses to competition, researchers find that one-third of school leaders in New Orleans cite using academic programs to give their schools a competitive edge. Academic programming included things like Advanced Placement (AP), language immersion, and pre-k programs (Jabbar, 2015).

While pre-k has been cited as a strategy used by some school leaders to increase their ability to attract and retain students, as well as boosting 3<sup>rd</sup> grade test scores, there is anecdotal evidence that some families send their pre-k aged children to schools with public pre-k programs but ultimately enroll the child in a different school for their kindergarten year. The schools in which these students ultimately enroll for kindergarten most likely benefit, but in a highly competitive and decentralized schooling environment, it may also serve as a disincentive for some schools to provide costly early childhood services (Appendix C).

There is a large body of literature describing the potential benefits of decentralized governance on educational outcomes, increased participation and decision-making power at the local and community level and increased school effectiveness in decision-making and resource allocation. Less of that research discusses the potential drawbacks of such decentralization on the oversight level of education systems (Yolcu, 2011; Barrera Osorio, 2009; Stinnette, 1993). However, one theory of decentralization posed by Wong in 1990, and again by Koren more

recently is that it ‘increases the fragmentation and complexity of city schooling, which paradoxically expands administration burdens’ ultimately leading to some sort of recentralization of the system to ease these tensions (Koren, 2007). A case study of fiscal decentralization policies in Latin America finds a similar burden placed on administrative services, and a lack of capacity to provide those services effectively (Garman et al., 2001). This body of research also indicates that the distribution of finances is often closely tied to measures of accountability, which may imply that schools are choosing whether or not to allocate funds to pre-k programming based on whether or not they associate with better outcomes along the measures for which they are being held accountable (Appendix C).

A more recent RAND study cites the cons of decentralization to the individual school site, or charter management organization, as creating a lesser ability of the school to redistribute funds, and to take advantages of economies of scale, as well as a lack of capacity to effectively manage the new roles and responsibilities placed upon them (Augustine, 2005). Extending this literature to the New Orleans context, one might expect a non-mandated, high cost program to be a lower priority in the face of increasing burdens at the administrative level, unless a school feels that pre-k programming may be offering them an advantage on more competitive measures.

An ongoing research study being conducted by the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans, a research organization dedicated to understanding the post-Katrina charter school reforms, finds that in the ten years post-Katrina, availability of school-based pre-k seats dropped, even as kindergarten seats have continued to rise (Weixler et al., 2017). Upon examining statewide policies that may

have some effect upon pre-k offerings, the study concludes that this drop in pre-k seats is unique to charter schools. For example, while charter schools in New Orleans appear less likely to take advantage of available state pre-k funding, public pre-k actually expanded throughout the rest of Louisiana. Additionally, pre-k subsidies to New Orleans have remained constant over the last several years, and therefore drops in pre-k seats cannot be attributed to lower levels of state and federal funding.

Even as pre-k seats throughout the city drop, there are still schools and CMOs who remain dedicated to providing public pre-k seats. The reasons for this have not been studied, but could range from a core belief in the benefits of early learning, to benefits related to kindergarten enrollment and subsequent third grade test scores (Appendix C). In a competitive environment, attracting and retaining students is no minor feat. It is possible that schools choosing to offer public pre-k seats view it as a strategy for boosting enrollment in subsequent years. The previously mentioned research alliance study finds that schools offering pre-k programs fill over 50% of their kindergarten seats with those pre-k students, a substantial advantage over K-6 schools trying to fill 100% of their kindergarten seats each year (Weixler et al., 2017).

## **Research Design and Methodology**

Using New Orleans as a case study, I used a mixed methods approach in an effort to understand the following:

- (1) *Who* chooses to offer these pre-k programs, and *why*?

- (2) *What* mechanisms may be dis-incentivizing others from offering these same services?
- (3) *How* should policymakers go about making public pre-k an increasingly attractive option for the city's schools?

Prior quantitative analyses exposing the limited availability of public pre-k seats in New Orleans prompted the qualitative component of this study (Weixler et al., 2017). Using both the qualitative interviews, and an additional quantitative component tracing the pathways students take from early childhood through third grade, the aim of this research is to better understand the mechanisms driving the insufficient pre-k availability in New Orleans and to provide sound policy recommendations based on those findings.

### **Qualitative Data**

To conduct this analysis, a multiple case study is used to enable comparisons within and across different cases. Using a multiple case method also adds precision and validity to the findings. This strategy allows for differentiation along a variety of significant characteristics such as authorizer and governance structure (Appendix B). It also allows for some level of representativeness of the collected data to the broader New Orleans population (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

**Sampling.** For the multiple case study, schools were categorized into one of four subgroups: have always offered pre-k, have added a pre-k, never had a pre-k, or had a pre-k program that has since been discontinued. In recruiting schools, the goal was to interview school leaders of three schools in each of the subgroups (Table 1). Emails were sent to school leaders containing information on the purpose of the

study, expected time commitment, and an attached copy of the consent form. In-person interviews with interested participants were scheduled.

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*Table 1. Cases by Authorizer, Governance Structure, Size, and Pre-K Programming*

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	Case summary (19 cases)
Authorizer*	RSD (14), OPSB (4), BESE (1)
Governance structure	Network charter (15), Non-network charter (4)
Size	252-878 students (average=607)
Pre-K program	Always (9), Added (4), Discontinued (3), Never (3)

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\*Recovery School District (RSD)  
Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE)  
Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB)

Sampling across the four categories of pre-k programming allows for a more in-depth evaluation of what incentives and disincentives exist by including school leaders who have come to different decisions regarding this non-mandatory offering. A purposive stratified sampling design was used to account for the variations in authorizer and governance structure across the schools in New Orleans. This sampling strategy was employed in response to the literature indicating that governance model, philosophical views, and capacity levels of offices can affect how decisions are made at the school level (Hill et al., 2001; Hassel & Herdman, 2000). The final sampling framework consists of 19 cases across 3 sampling dimensions: pre-k programming, authorizer, and governance structure (Appendix B).



**Data collection.** Data collected from interviews with 10 New Orleans school leaders throughout the summer of 2016 is used to provide an in-depth understanding of the decision-making processes schools undergo when considering the addition of a pre-k program. Based on the sampling criteria, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with school leaders were conducted. Several of these school leaders operate at the CMO level, and therefore were interviewed about decisions made at several different schools. Of the 18 school leaders originally recruited to participate in the study, one declined, and seven did not respond to the email request. As a result, interviews were conducted with 10 school leaders overseeing a total of 19 different schools. The conceptual framework guided the interview protocol design and included questions pertaining to school history with pre-k, school governance structure, and school mission, among others (Appendix D).

**Analysis plan.** Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded using NVivo software. The data were analyzed both deductively, using concepts and themes identified from the literature review and outlined in the conceptual framework, and inductively, noting additional concepts and themes presented by participants during the interviews (Appendix E). Throughout the interview process, I used memos to document emerging themes throughout the interviewing process, and reviewed the Louisiana Department of Education's requirements and guidelines for pre-k programs to supplement the data gathered in the interviews. and ran summaries by code in NVivo to examine key concepts in trends within the transcribed interviews.

As a preliminary overview of the data, I ran a query on word frequency in NVivo across case types. Emergent themes consistent with what had been documented in several of my memos appeared in this early stage of the analysis. I then drew out additional themes from the data by looking at the coding summary by node, examining responses coded within each subgroup of pre-k offerings, as well as by authorizer type and governance structure. While no distinct differences appeared across authorizer type, decision-making patterns did emerge across differing governance structures and school sizes.

### Quantitative Data

In an effort to quantify the competitive advantage gained by offering a pre-k program through boosts in kindergarten enrollment and the socio-emotional and academic benefits as children progress through their elementary years, I used data provided by the state to track students' pathways from pre-k through third grade. Using the school ID associated with each student in each year, I created pathways to indicate whether the student remained at the same school from one year to the next, and if not, whether they moved within New Orleans or to a district outside of the city. Students who were retained, or did not follow a traditional grade path were dropped from the analysis. Once these pathways were created, I aggregated the data up to the school level to observe general trends by school. These pathways provide additional details about the stability of students in their schools, and whether or not mobility appears to differ based upon pre-k attendance. This data comes from a student-level dataset provided by the Louisiana Department of Education, spanning the years of 2001-2015. These student level data track individual students'

pathways from either pre-k, or kindergarten in the case of students who did not attend pre-k, through the Louisiana school system. The purpose is to determine the various pathways and mobility rates of students who enroll in a pre-k program versus those who do not. The quantitative component is solely descriptive; it is not meant to determine any causal links between schools offering a pre-k program and potential effects on subsequent enrollment or test scores.

## **Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study. Due to time constraints, and the intention to use this paper for completion of a Master's program, the interview and transcription pieces of the qualitative research were conducted entirely by one researcher and therefore are increasingly subject to internal biases. Additionally, while the intention was to audio record all of the interviews, three interviewees preferred not to be recorded, so the notes for those interviews may be incomplete. To address these limitations, informant feedback will be sought out in order to avoid misrepresentation of the perspectives of the school leaders interviewed prior to any public dissemination of the research. A third limitation of the qualitative analysis is that two of the school leaders interviewed were not at the school at the time the decision about whether or not to offer pre-k was made. They spoke to what they remembered of the decision-making process, but were not actively involved in the decision, and therefore may not provide an entirely accurate overview of the process.

The quantitative component is limited to descriptive statistics. However, it is included in an effort to ensure the integrity of the results. The data collected from the interviews is complemented by the data trends. The final analysis will use both data sources to draw conclusions and provide policy recommendations regarding the incentives and disincentives to offering pre-k programming. An additional limitation of the quantitative component is that the data is limited to students attending school in Louisiana. Therefore, I am unable to determine whether or not students who were not in the Louisiana system prior to kindergarten attended a pre-k program.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Qualitative Results**

The 10 school leaders interviewed based decisions about whether or not to offer pre-k on the following factors: financing, facility space, availability of certified and licensed early childhood teachers, strategic diversification of student population, increased kindergarten readiness, and boosts in kindergarten enrollment. Across authorizer and governance structure, school leaders consistently referred to pre-k as a strategy for increasing kindergarten enrollment numbers and remaining competitive in New Orleans' decentralized environment. However, few of the programs have been running long enough to see any potential effects of early learning programming on third grade test scores.

There was some confusion around the supply of pre-k in the 2016-17 academic year. Two school leaders specifically mentioned the need for 3-year old

seats, but with the rollout of the new EnrollNOLA centralized early learning enrollment system, 4-year old supply and demand is less clear-cut. When asked directly whether or not leaders thought the supply of pre-k seats matched the level of demand in the city, one school leader responded, “Well, I don’t know, because now they say they have an excess of 500 seat. In the past they’ve said that they... in the past, no. This year I’m kind of like ‘What do you mean there’s an excess?’ because in the past there was always a waitlist” (Interview 2). Another school leader echoed that confusion:

*“So, it’s interesting because I’ve been watching our waitlists [and they] are kind of thin this year. People have either decided that they can’t, they’re not going to participate because they don’t have the information they need to confirm their status, or that um, that [the process] overly complicated. But, based on the census information, and based on the total number of seats we are offering in the system...probably 25% above what we are offering, should be the number of kids that are trying to access.”*

– Interview 4

The consensus, though, was that the demand for seats is still higher than the seats that are currently available in the city.

In the 2016-17 school year, 60% of all New Orleans schools serving elementary schools grades offered a pre-k program (SPENO, 2017). Citywide, non-network schools do offer pre-k at lower rates than networked and non-charter schools (Table 1).

*Table 1. Percent of New Orleans elementary schools offering LA4 pre-k programs by governance structure.*

	RSD Elementary	BESE Elementary	OPSB Elementary	
<b>Network Charter</b>	64% (N= 33)	-	100% (N= 3)	<b>67%</b>
<b>Non-Network Charter</b>	75% (N= 4)	33% (N= 3)	33% (N= 12)	<b>40%</b>
<b>Direct run</b>	-	-	100% (N= 3)	<b>100%</b>
	<b>65%</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>56%</b>	

\*Recovery School District (RSD)  
Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE)  
Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB)

Of the 19 schools represented in the interviews, 13 currently have pre-k programs. Of those, 11 are network schools. Every school leader cited funding as a barrier to operating pre-k programs, but those in network schools were less likely to report funding as the most significant barrier than those in standalone charters were because they were better able to take advantage of economies of scale. The reasons each of these schools choose to offer pre-k varies ranging from mission-driven decisions to enrollment and feeder pattern considerations, but school leaders agreed that the benefits outweigh the costs.

Even school leaders whose schools do not provide pre-k programming acknowledged the benefits of offering pre-k, but decisions for schools with discontinued (N=3) or non-existent pre-k programs (N=3) centered around funding, facility space, and lack of administrative expertise as reasons for not providing early childhood programming.

**Decentralized environment.** The decentralized context in New Orleans is a complicating factor in a school's ability to offer pre-k. While it creates difficulties pertaining to economies of scale, specifically in standalone charters, and increases

burdens on school administrative staff, several school leaders considered the New Orleans context an asset in that the competitive environment encourages schools to offer quality pre-k programs and develop relationships with families and students at a young age. One example of the economies of scale argument came with the ability of schools to hire staff who would specialize in or oversee their early childhood programs. Nearly all of the school leaders interviewed felt that pre-k required a unique knowledge set, but networked charters were more able to hire these specialized staff members. One school leader acknowledged that pre-k had not been on their radar until they hired a teacher with early childhood experience who felt comfortable taking the lead on the development of a pre-k program.

The decentralized environment also seems to have different affects on non-networked versus networked charters. Not only did networked charters tend to be better able to take advantage of economies of scale and find and hire knowledgeable early childhood experts to oversee their programs, they were also able to take advantage of various fund-raising opportunities. One leader of a network of schools comments, “People don’t offer pre-k because of costs. If you’re a single site, you probably can’t afford it” (Interview 2). While single sites do still choose to offer pre-k programs, they agreed that being a non-networked charter was a disadvantage in terms of their ability to offer this high cost program.

A recently implemented coordinated enrollment application for pre-k seats in the city is aimed at addressing some of barriers to pre-k enrollment in a decentralized public school system. Families submit an online OneApp application, and then must bring a photo ID, proof of income, and other documentation to verify

their eligibility for LA4 funding at one of three family resource centers around the city. Families rank their top choice for pre-k programs, and are assigned to one of those schools. The EnrollNOLA early childhood process is new, and many school leaders voiced their frustrations with the process. They felt that in its infancy, it was overly complicated for families, and many families who would have previously enrolled in a pre-k program were confused by the process and ultimately did not enroll their child. With time and better advertising, the general consensus of school leaders was that this rollout will be positive for families in the long run.

**School mission/values.** Four of the ten school leaders cited providing pre-k specifically as a part of their school or CMO's mission. While each of the school leaders acknowledged the importance of the availability of early learning options, especially for low-income families, there were varying degrees to which leaders felt it was their responsibility to offer pre-k. The six leaders whose schools had never offered a pre-k, or had offered one that has since been discontinued, consistently made comments implying that while it was important, they felt that students had the ability to attend other pre-k programs, and therefore was not a critical offering for their school to provide. Among those schools choosing to offer pre-k, leaders presented different rationales for doing so. Those citing it as a mission-specific choice frequently mentioned the well-being of the child, the benefits to the community, and their ability to encourage socio-emotional development to those children who come to school with 'their emotional backpacks full, and their stomachs empty.' Others who did not specifically view pre-k programming as a part of their mission, still viewed it as a strategy for accomplishing their mission,



whatever that may be. One school leader cited the ultimate mission of their school as college readiness and viewed pre-k as a vehicle for preparing students for post-secondary education. Others used pre-k as a way of achieving the student population for whom it was their mission to serve, or closing the achievement gap. Most schools offering pre-k programming echoed the sentiments of one school leader who said very simply, 'It's part of the package. It's what we believe' (Interview 2).

One school leader whose school has discontinued their pre-k program actually discussed pre-k as potentially in tension with their mission. As a school dedicated to serving a diverse body of students, offering LA4 pre-k seats targeted specifically at low-income populations could make it difficult to achieve the socioeconomic balance in subsequent grades that the school strives for. "We believe in diversity, the power of it, the enriching nature of it for everybody ... we have to wrestle with the question that our pre-k would be all kids from low-income homes... that's just a mission question" (Interview 8). In order to maintain a socioeconomically diverse student population, the pre-k program at this school would need to offer a mix of tuition-based and LA4 seats. However, this particular school leader felt that providing some tuition-based pre-k seats essentially allows parents to 'buy' kindergarten seats at a school, and therefore felt that tuition-based pre-k seats was not an option for their school. Ultimately, the school decided that the struggle to maintain a diverse population of students along socioeconomic lines was more central to their mission than offering pre-k services for students.

**Accountability.** School leaders whose schools offered pre-k programs (N=13) consistently affirmed that the earlier they got students, the more prepared they felt those students were when they entered kindergarten. Only one school leader specifically mentioned the advantage their pre-k students saw on the Measures of Academic Process (MAP) interim assessment scores in both reading in math. This leader estimated that 85-90% score at or above grade level on their 2<sup>nd</sup> grade MAP test in reading, and thought that the number was similar for math. The overall focus, however, was not on increased test scores, but rather on preparedness to learn, and socio-emotional behavior. Many leaders offering pre-k referred to it as a strategy as a way to ensure that their students were able to perform at grade level, or as a helpful starting point for ensuring that the student was college ready when the time came, but did not directly reference a correlation to their students' subsequent testing performance. "College readiness. I mean, our goal is to prepare students to enter and excel in a rigorous 4-year college or university and I think that preparation starts as young as 3... if not at birth" (Interview 2). Another school leader stated that their numbers showed that only 15-20% of students without some sort of pre-k program were entering kindergarten on level, while 75-78% of their pre-k students entered kindergarten on level.

Socio-emotional behavior and readiness to learn were big focuses of those school leaders whose schools chose to offer pre-k. They talked about the importance of pre-k in preparing their kids to be *students*; to learn to walk in lines, sit in a square, share toys, things that complement a students' ability to learn and engage in academic material (Interview 5). Additionally, there is concern around kids coming

to school in kindergarten with severe disabilities that have been undiagnosed for the first 5 years of that child's life. Pre-k allows those students to be identified earlier, in the hopes of getting them the services that they aren't receiving outside of school. "I think for special education it's [pre-k] really great because you're able to get a lot kids the support they need earlier on" (Interview 2). While a handful of leaders did cite increased academic abilities and a desire to provide high quality programs, the focus of these conversations revolved around the more holistic well-being of the children they served and the power of early learning as a strategy for preparing them to learn more effectively in their K-12 years.

Interestingly, one of the school leaders whose school had discontinued their pre-k program acknowledged the benefits to starting kids early, but felt that they could address the academic readiness component in kindergarten. "I'm less concerned about academic readiness, but I think our kids are missing out on some social emotional readiness for kindergarten. Our pre-k program would focus almost entirely on getting them socio-emotionally ready to succeed" (Interview 8). Their reason for discontinuing their pre-k program was primarily financial and mission-based, but the school leader discussed their plans to add a pre-k program if and when it became a more financially viable option.

**Competition.** There was very open discussion in each of the interviews around the competitive nature of New Orleans' education environment. Schools offering pre-k wanted to offer quality programs in order to attract and maintain students.

*"We will have a competitive advantage by offering pre-k. Competition when I'm talking about it this way, it's good for families. Schools are trying to make themselves more attractive to families. I don't know if that would be true in a system where a parent went it to the central office and you just go where you're assigned."*

– Interview 5

In an open-enrollment environment, filling seats is hugely important to the sustainability of each school. In addition to citing the school readiness aspect of pre-k programs, school leaders with schools that offer a pre-k consistently cited its positive effect on their kindergarten enrollment. Whereas schools starting at kindergarten have the challenge of filling 100% of their kindergarten seats, interviews with leaders of schools with pre-k programs discussed having anywhere from 50-90% of kindergarten seats filled by their pre-k students – a huge advantage, both financially and culturally for the school.

However, not all of the discussion around subsequent kindergarten enrollment boosts was positive. "Because certain schools don't offer pre-k, parents just get their kids into any pre-k that's open. Then they'll want to move the student for kindergarten because their siblings go to a different school that doesn't offer pre-k" (Interview 1). This was a trend observed by most school leaders, not just those offering pre-k programs, but those leaders whose schools did not offer programs as well. One leader actually had talked with a parent who had chosen another pre-k program already knowing that they would be enrolling at this particular leader's school for kindergarten.

*“I think that overall makes it a bit harder for schools who are making the commitment to offer pre-k because we’d ideally like to keep our students who attend pre-k into kinder, 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>...some of our campuses have lower retention because there’s more options for parents in kindergarten than there are in pre-k.”*

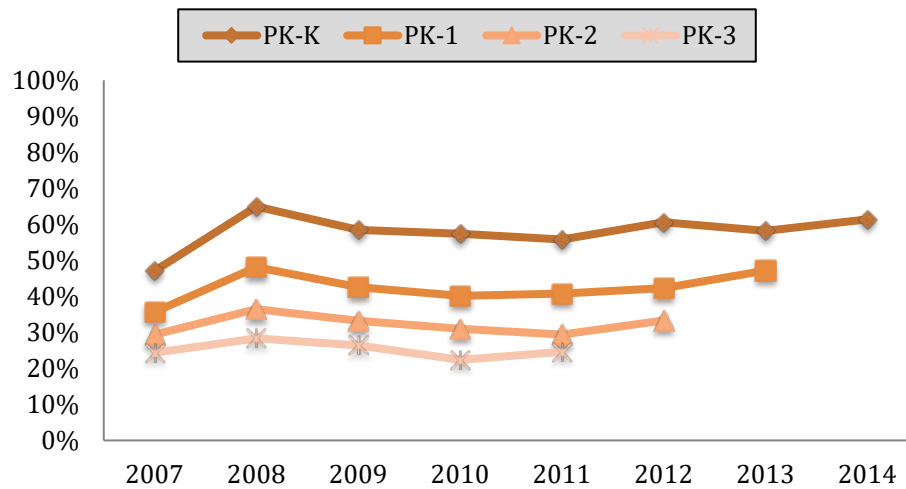
– Interview 1

While there was a sense that some parents may be using enrolling their kids in these pre-k seats without any intention of staying with the school, it did not seem like this was the majority of parents, and therefore the boosts in kindergarten enrollment observed in schools with pre-k programs were still cited as worth the cost.

### Quantitative Results

Using student-level data for 2001-2015 provided by the Louisiana Department of Education, I find that schools offering pre-k programs fill approximately 60% of kindergarten seats with existing pre-k students (Figure 1). With citywide open enrollment, and schools competing for students, a 60% persistence rate of students from pre-k to kindergarten constitutes an advantage for schools offering pre-k over those who do not. Schools not offering pre-k must fill 100% of their kindergarten seats. However, trends show that persistence through third grade is much lower, with only a quarter of pre-k students persisting through third grade at the same school (Figure 1). Persistence rates of New Orleans students from both pre-k to kindergarten and pre-k through third grade are five to ten percentage points lower, on average, than those of their peers statewide.

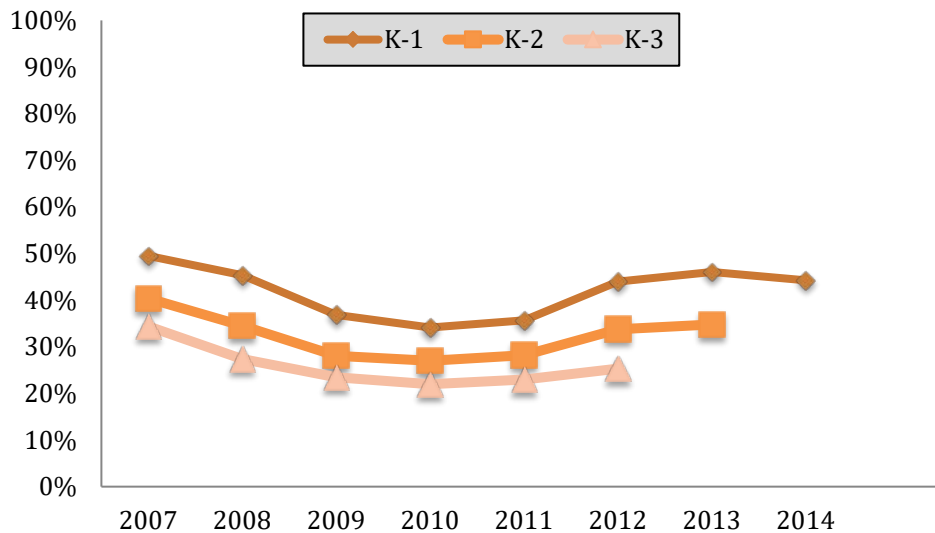
*Figure 1. Percent of students attending pre-k in New Orleans who persist through subsequent grades at the same school.*



As indicated by many of the school leaders, investment in pre-k is oftentimes an effort to create a feeder program into their school's K-12 system. Low persistence rates can indicate a low return on investment for schools housing pre-k programs.

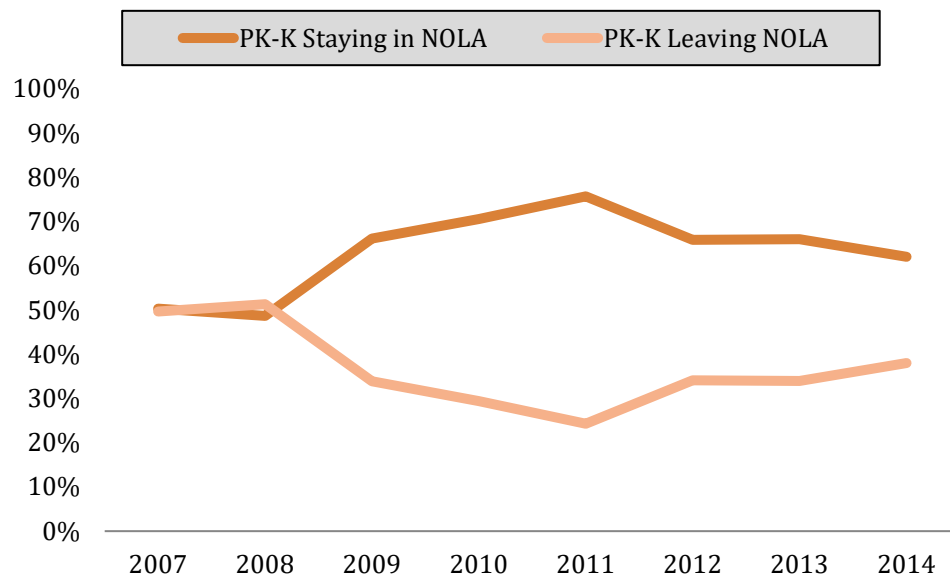
Additionally, there is limited evidence that students who attend a pre-k are more likely to remain at the same school through third grade than students who do not attend pre-k and enter the system in kindergarten. Persistence through third grade is very similar, if not slightly higher for students who enter school in kindergarten (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Percent of New Orleans students with no pre-k, and entering school in kindergarten, who persist through subsequent grades at the same school.



Of the students who don't remain at the same school from pre-k to kindergarten, 62% chose to enroll at a different school within New Orleans, while only 38% of those students left New Orleans altogether (Figure 3). This is slightly higher than the approximately 57% of students in kindergarten, first, and second grades who transfer schools within the city in subsequent years. The high inter-city mobility could indicate that a percentage of students are using LA4 seats for pre-k programming and then transferring to a different school for kindergarten. It might be that students relying on LA4 funds for pre-k will not have an incentive to remain at their pre-k school for subsequent grades if, for example, they have a sibling attending a school that does not offer a pre-k, there is a school nearer to where they live, or they prefer to attend a school with a higher letter grade or wider variety of services offered than the school at which they attended pre-k.

*Figure 3. Mobility patterns of students who do not remain in the same school from pre-k through kindergarten.*



Also of interest, is the widening gap between 2008 and 2011. This corresponds with the Recovery School District's turnover efforts. In 2009 the Recovery School District began closing schools and turning them over to charter management organizations at a rapid rate, further decentralizing the education environment. There was a corresponding drop in pre-k seats offered (Weixler et al., 2017). As pre-k seats drop, the rates at which pre-k students switch to other kindergarten programs within New Orleans increases as well. One potential interpretation of this data suggests that as charter schools increase in percentage of the market share, and pre-k seats decline, families send their children to pre-k programs and subsequently enroll their student at a different school for kindergarten. This is consistent with the anecdotal evidence provided by many of



the school leaders, and a potential disincentive for schools taking the financial hit to offer these pre-k seats.

These results suggest that while the competitive advantages of offering a pre-k program may exist to some extent in the form of increased kindergarten enrollment and persistence through third grade, those trends may not be strong enough to act as standalone incentives for schools to offer these costly pre-k programs. Therefore, it becomes increasingly important for policymakers and practitioners to incentivize schools to offer these programs in other ways.

## **Policy Recommendations**

### **State**

A consistent theme running throughout the interviews was finances. Schools offering pre-k seats were offering those programs at a loss, and those who chose not to offer pre-k or to discontinue their programs cited funding as the primary reason. Historically, schools were unable to charge more than the state allocated in LA4 funds, which falls just short of \$4,600 per child, to tuition paying students. The Louisiana Department of Education recently raised the cap on the amount a public school can charge for pre-k tuition, allowing the school no more than the average per-pupil cost. However, classroom space and utility costs may not be included in that total. However, with the unique pre-k classroom requirements, the tuition cap could be extended to include classroom space, with the condition that a school could not be earning a profit on those tuition seats. A concern, however, over students

being able to ‘buy’ kindergarten seats should be thoroughly considered before making the proposed changes to tuition fee regulations.

### Local

Another theme that presented itself in a majority of the interviews was a lack of early childhood expertise. With the transition of all New Orleans charter schools back to the Orleans Parish School Board, an initiative to create some centralized support services around pre-k should be pursued. Having a central office staff knowledgeable in early childhood funding streams, diverse delivery options, and the unique policies and regulations that come along with early childhood programming may remove some of both the staffing and financial burdens that schools face when trying to add pre-k programs. This could come in the form of a Orleans Parish School Board staff member with expertise in early childhood programming who could consult with schools interested in adding a pre-k, or provision of professional development opportunities in early learning.

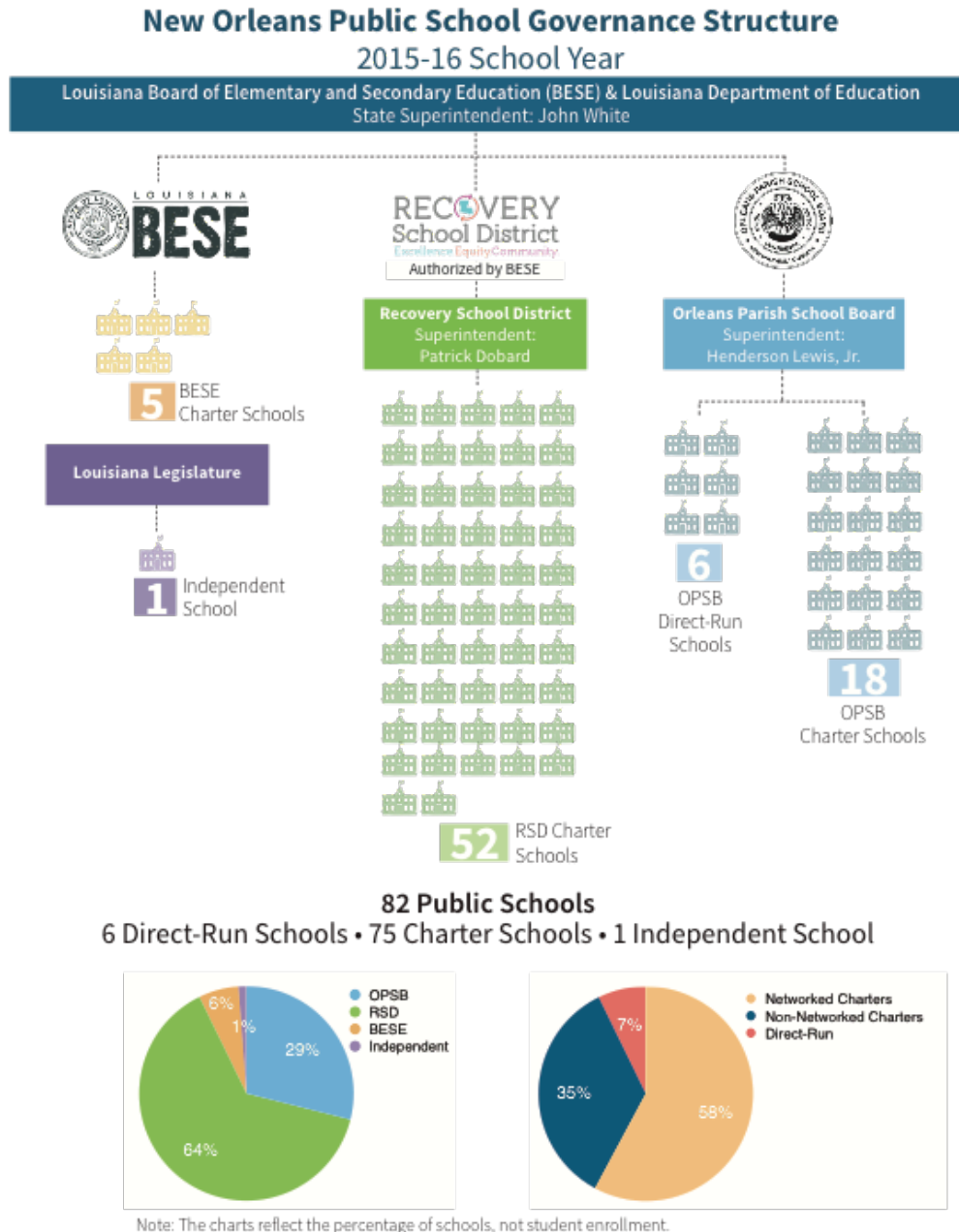
Additionally, the Orleans Parish School Board should work to advertise and promote diverse delivery options, and bolster relationships between the schools and the early learning centers. This allows for schools to receive LA4 funds for pre-k programming, but without the additional administrative burdens of managing finances and acquiring staff members early childhood expertise and certifications.

The results of this research confirm the theory proposed in the literature that even a highly beneficial service such as pre-k can be difficult to offer in a decentralized environment. The financial, administrative, and capacity limitations of standalone schools and networks limit their ability to provide these non-mandated

services. The system's inability to effectively offer these services, pre-k being one example, often causes the greatest harm to the system's most vulnerable students. As the portfolio model gains popularity, and charter schools make up increasing percentages of the schools in urban districts across the country, it is important for policymakers to be intentional in thinking about how best to incentivize optional services that have proven to be beneficial components of our public education system.

## Appendices

### Appendix A. New Orleans Public School Governance Structure



## Appendix B. Sampling Criteria for Interview Participants

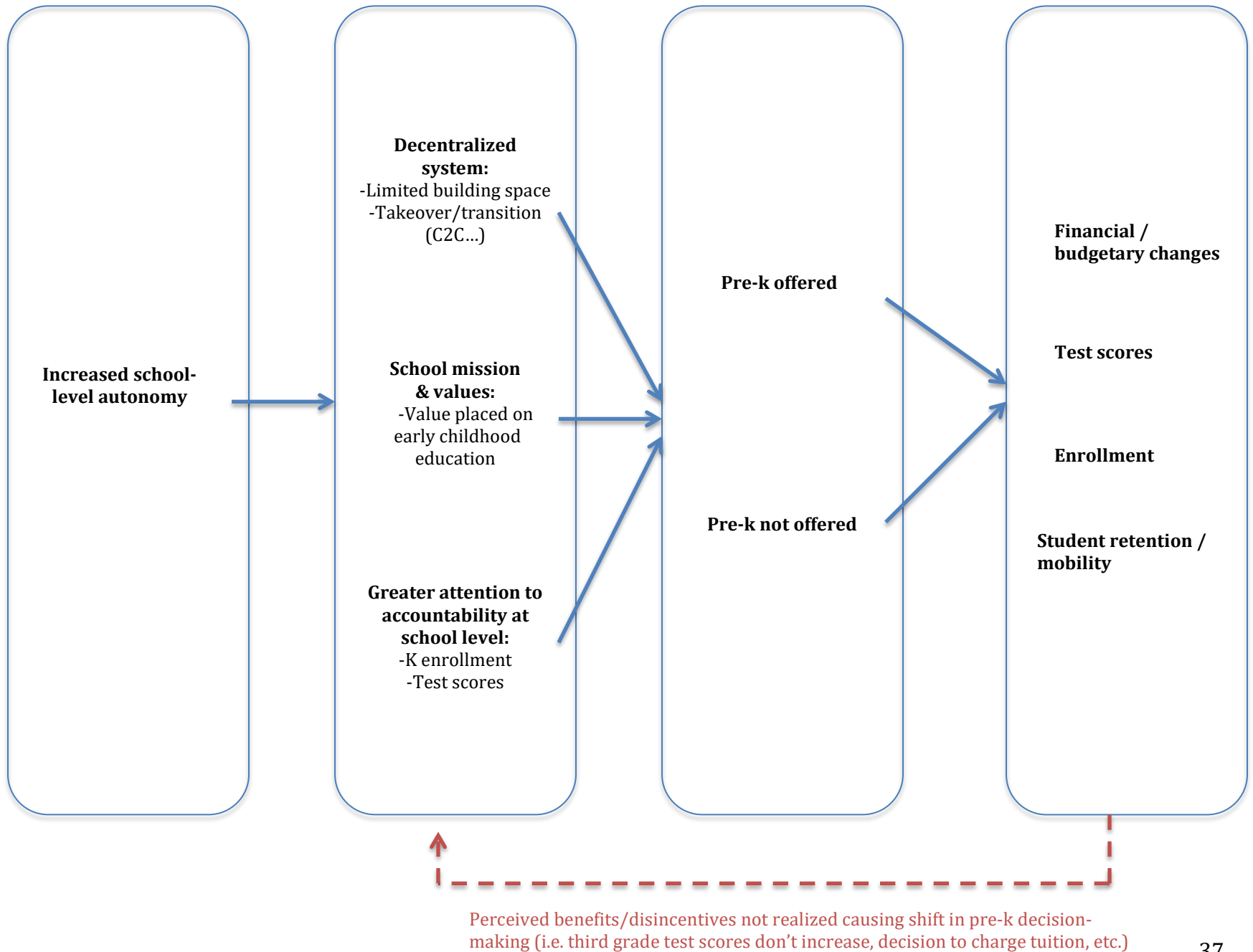
Sampling Criteria			
Cases	Authorizer*	Governance Structure	Pre-K Offered
School # 1	RSD	Network	Always
School # 2	RSD	Network	Added
School # 3	RSD	Network	Added
School # 4	RSD	Network	Added
School # 5	RSD	Network	Always
School # 6	BESE	Non-network	Always
School # 7	RSD	Network	Never
School # 8	RSD	Network	Always
School # 9	RSD	Network	Always
School # 10	RSD	Network	Never
School # 11	RSD	Network	Always
School # 12	RSD	Network	Always
School # 13	RSD	Network	Always
School # 14	OPSB	Non-network	Discontinued
School # 15	OPSB	Network	Discontinued
School # 16	OPSB	Network	Added
School # 17	OPSB	Non-network	Always
School # 18	RSD	Non-network	Never
School # 19	RSD	Network	Discontinued

\*Recovery School District (RSD)

Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE)

Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB)

## Appendix C. Conceptual Framework



## Appendix D. Interview Protocol

### School/Leader Background Info

- (1) Please tell me a little bit about your role and the school(s) that you work with.
- (2) I understand that [X school] is part of [CMO name/OPSB] and answers to [CMO/independent/OPSB board]. How does your relationship with [CMO/OPSB/board] function/work in practice?
  - a. Who makes decisions about things like budget, facilities, and grade offerings?

### General Pre-k Questions

- (3) Generally, what do you see as some of the benefits to offering a pre-k? What are the drawbacks?
  - a. How might offering pre-k affect a school's finances? Facility space? K enrollment? Student retention? Test scores?
- (4) Tell me a little bit about your school's history with pre-k programs, if any?
  - a. Why have you decided [to offer/add/not to offer/discontinue] pre-k at your school?
  - b. Who was involved with that decision? How was the decision made? What was your role/how were you involved in that decision-making process?
  - c. What were the most important considerations when making that decision?

### Questions Specific to Different School Categories

#### If pre-k offered

#### Always

1. What is the actual cost per child to run your LA4 classes? Is it above and beyond what you get in LA4 funding?
  - a. Where does the extra money come from?
  - b. What else would you be spending that money on if you weren't supplementing pre-k?
2. Do you see your school continuing to offer pre-k indefinitely?
  - a. Why or why not?
  - b. How do you think your school benefits from offering a pre-k program? Please explain.
  - c. What are some of the challenges you have experienced in offering pre-k?
3. Do you feel the pre-k program at your school has been successful? In what ways?

### Added

1. For how many years has your school offered a pre-k program?
2. Was adding a pre-k always a part of your school's mission?
3. What was your school's process for adding a pre-k?
  - a. What difficulties did you have, if any?
4. What is the actual cost per child to run your LA4 classes? Is it above and beyond what you get in LA4 funding?
  - a. Where does the extra money come from?
  - b. What else would you be spending that money on if you weren't supplementing pre-k?
5. Do you feel like the program has been successful thus far? Is it sustainable?
6. Do you see your school continuing to offer pre-k indefinitely?
  - a. Why or why not?
7. What differences do you see in your school as a result of offering the pre-k program?
  - a. How do you think your school benefits from offering a pre-k program?  
Please explain.
  - b. What are some of the challenges you have experienced in offering pre-k?

### If pre-k not offered

### Never

1. Would there be any circumstances under which your school would decide to offer a pre-k?
  - a. If so, what would those be?
2. Do you think there are benefits that your school is missing out on as a result of not having a pre-k program? Do you think there are challenges that you avoid by choosing not to offer pre-k?

### Discontinued

1. [If not answered above] What factors influenced your decision to discontinue your program?
2. What was the actual cost per child to run your LA4 classes? Was it above and beyond what you get in LA4 funding?
  - a. Where did the extra money come from?
  - b. What else are you able to spend that money on now that you aren't supplementing pre-k?
3. Would there be any circumstances under which your school would decide to offer a pre-k program again?
  - a. If so, what would those be?



4. Did you see any differences in your school as a result of dropping the pre-k program?
  - a. Do you think there are benefits that your school is missing out on as a result of not having a pre-k program? Do you think there are challenges that you avoid by choosing not to offer pre-k?

#### **Local Context and Policy Implications**

- (5) What are your thoughts about the state of pre-k in New Orleans more broadly?
  - a. Are there enough seats available to match the level of student interest in pre-k programs?
- (6) What could be done to make offering pre-k a more feasible option?

## Appendix E. NVivo Codebook

Name	Description	Number Of Sources Coded
Academic performance	Student academic success as measured by standardized tests, high school and college preparedness.	5
Added	Schools who did not originally offer pre-k seats, but have since chosen to add a pre-k program.	5
Always	School who have always offered a pre-k program.	7
Availability	Supply of pre-k seats sufficiently matching the demand.	5
Charter application	Requirements for including pre-k in the initial charter application.	1
Competition	Competition as a driving force behind offering a pre-k program.	1
Decisions	How decisions around offering pre-k are made.	7
Discontinued	Schools who offered a pre-k program that has since been discontinued.	3

Name	Description	Number Of Sources Coded
Disincentives	Factors that dis-incentivize schools from offering pre-k programs.	0
Diverse delivery	Partnership with an off-site early learning center to offer LA4 seats.	3
Diversifying student body	Pre-k as a strategy for diversifying the school's student population by socioeconomic status	4
Early interventions	Ability to diagnose and provide special education interventions at a younger age.	3
Facilities	Facility requirements and space constraints.	7
Funding	Financing of pre-k programs.	10
Human capital	Ability to find, hire, and retain knowledgeable and certified early learning admin. and teachers.	9
Incentives	Factors that incentivize schools to offer pre-k programs.	1
Kindergarten enrollment	Pre-k students matriculate to kindergarten, boosting a school's kindergarten enrollment numbers.	7

Name	Description	Number Of Sources Coded
Kindergarten readiness	Pre-k prepares students to enter kindergarten ready to learn.	7
Never	Schools who have never offered a pre-k program.	2
Parent involvement	Pre-k programs introduce parents to the school and encourage early involvement with the school.	3
Policies	Current policies around pre-k program offerings.	3
Recommendations	Potential recommendations for making pre-k a more accessible option for schools.	7
Socio-emotional	Socio-emotional benefits of offering a pre-k program.	6
Student mobility	Open enrollment provides additional options for students to enroll at different schools throughout the city.	5

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